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ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 311301Z MAR 08
FM AMEMBASSY ANKARA
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RUEKJCS/CJCS WASHDC IMMEDIATE
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RUEUITH/ODC ANKARA TU
INFO RUEHTH/AMEMBASSY ATHENS 8786
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 4061
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RUEHBS/AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS 6508
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DEPARTMENT FOR INR/R/MR, EUR/SE, EUR/PD, NEA/PD, DRL
JCS PASS J-5/CDR S. WRIGHT

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: OPRC KMDR TU

SUBJECT: ANKARA MEDIA REACTION REPORT
MONDAY, MARCH 31, 2008

In Today's Papers

AKP Closure Case

Hurriyet, Milliyet, Sabah, Radikal, Taraf, Cumhuriyet, Zaman, Yeni Safak and others report Turkey's Constitutional Court will determine whether to proceed with the closure case against the AKP on Monday. Court of Appeals (Yargitay) Chief Prosecutor Abdurrahman Yalcinkaya submitted his request for the closure of Turkey's ruling party. If the court accepts the indictment, the AKP will submit its preliminary defense to the court in one month. After the Chief Prosecutor states his views on the merits of the case, the AKP will make a verbal defense, which will be followed by a verbal response from the Chief Prosecutor. Later, the reporter of the Constitutional Court will prepare his report on the merits of the case. Turkey's Constitution stipulates that at least seven of the 11 court members have to vote for closure in order for the court to ban a political party.

Sunday papers quote Yalcinkaya as saying "up to 40 AKP lawmakers could be banned from politics," as a result of the suit. Mainstream Hurriyet quotes on Monday an unidentified AKP official who said, "The Constitutional Court could reject the indictment on the grounds that it was not legally possible to start investigations against the president." Islamist-oriented Yeni Safak writes over the weekend that "according to jurists, the Constitutional Court should return the indictment to the Chief Prosecutor because it does not include the AKP officials' statements in support of secularism." Over the weekend, Sabah said the AKP might hold early parliamentary elections and municipality elections before the Constitutional Court makes its final decision about the suit.

Islamist-oriented Yeni Safak says Yalcinkaya claimed, "The closure case would not have been launched if the AKP had heeded the warnings on the headscarf issue." Yeni Safak asserts "Yalcinkaya's remarks link the headscarf to the closure case. This shows that the suit was filed was to influence the Constitutional Court's decision on the headscarf issue." Liberal Radikal writes, "Changing the

constitution and holding a referendum is not the right way to resolve the existing problem. Everything should be done to protect our democracy against a court decision that might be described as a legal coup. However, remaining loyal to the principle of secularism is as important as maintaining democracy." A Saturday column in the Islamist-oriented Zaman says, "It's the AKP's duty to defend democracy under such circumstances" and "the Erdogan government must work towards a fast alignment of the Turkish political system with EU standards. This can be done by calling a referendum regardless of whether the Constitutional Court accepts or rejects the indictment."

AKP Leaders and EU's Olli Rehn on AKP Closure Case
All papers report that on Sunday, Prime Minister Erdogan told supporters in Yalova and Bursa, "Everyone has to respect the national will" because, "16.5 million voters backed the AKP in the latest elections. We will continue on our path; the only way to defeat us in this democratic process is the ballot box." Erdogan complained, "It is disgraceful that the AKP is linked exclusively to the headscarf issue." He noted that the headscarf reforms passed by the parliament were backed by another party, the MHP, and it was a "double standard" that no one placed any sanctions against this party. Mainstream Vatan comments, "Erdogan implies that the prosecutor should have filed suits to disband the MHP as well." Deputy Prime Minister Cemil Cicek denounced efforts to "seize the administration of the country through undemocratic means." Culture Minister Ertugrul Gunay told reporters, "Democracy will prevail in Turkey. Parties cannot be closed in today's world. Attempting to close down the rule of the people would mean Turkey has dropped to the second division of the democracy league."

EU Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn, speaking to press in Slovenia after a meeting with EU foreign ministers, said he viewed the AKP

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closure case with "growing concern and disbelief. I hope the judges will consider Turkey's long-term interests to be an important European democracy respecting all democratic principles of the EU."

Editorial Commentary on AKP Closure Case

In mainstream Milliyet, Semih Idiz wrote (3/31): "On Saturday, EU Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn warned Turkey against proceeding forward with the AKP closure case. Some in Turkey regarded this warning as a threat. Actually, party closure is against EU criteria. Europeans do not close political parties. According to the Venice Commission of the European Council, a political party can be closed down only if it calls for violence and is involved in violence. This applied to the closure of communist and fascist parties in Germany and Italy during the 1940s and the 1950s. While Turkey is a member of the Venice Commission, the closure of communist and fascist parties in Germany and Italy during the 1940s and 1950s cannot justify the closure of the AKP. Despite all of this, if Turkey's Constitution Court decides to close down the AKP, we better think about our prestige. The European Court of Human Rights may reject the ruling. Therefore Olli Rehn's words should be regarded as a warning instead of a threat."

Nuri Elibol wrote in conservative Turkiye (3/31): "We have to bear in mind the economic impact behind this political crisis. Turkey is going through a transformation in terms of the emergence of new capital owners. The major flow of capital has gone to the hands of new bosses. This is the main reason why anti-AKP efforts have commenced. The AKP government did not share the wealth with both the status quo and capital owners, and now the AKP is facing the consequences. This is about a power struggle. Had PM Erdogan served the interests of certain groups, there would not be tensions regarding religious fundamentalism or anti-secularism issues. This is a big game. The ultimate goal is to disqualify Erdogan in politics."

Justice Minister Sahin: "744 Cases Pending for Violating Article 301 of Turkish Penal Code"

Liberal Radikal and mainstream Milliyet report that, despite the promises of former Justice Minister Cicek, PM Erdogan and Foreign

Minister Babacan, nothing has been done about amending article 301 over the last three years. During a meeting with the MHP deputy group chairman Mehmet Sandir, Justice Minister Mehmet Ali Sahin said that "as of the first three months of 2007, there were 744 ongoing cases in the courts, opened based on article 301. 536 of these cases were handed over from 2006."

A New Era with Iraq

Cumhuriyet, Sabah: Leftist-nationalist Cumhuriyet reports, "Since Iraqi President Talabani and U.S. Vice-President Cheney visited Ankara, Turkey has intensified its initiatives regarding Iraq." Turkey's Special Envoy for Iraq, Murat Ozcelik, has held meetings in Baghdad for one week. Cumhuriyet writes, "During this new period in bilateral relations, Turkey and Iraq will focus on the transferring Iraqi oil and natural gas to international markets through Turkey, boosting economic corporation, eliminating the PKK terror organization, and initiating dialog between Turkey and the Kurdish administration. Reportedly, Ozcelik met with Iraqi Vice-Presidents Tarik el Hasimi and Adil Abdulmehdi, Parliament Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Humam Hammudi, Deputy PM Berham Salih and Saadettin Ergec, the chairman of Iraqi-Turkmen, in Baghdad. During the meeting with Vice-President Abdulmehdi, the two officials discussed the cross border operations. Abdulmehdi stressed the importance of the bilateral relations based on respect for sovereignty, national independence and territorial integrity. Murat Ozcelik reiterated Turkey's support for the Iraqi government and noted the improved relations between the two countries.

Meanwhile, mainstream Sabah quotes Massoud Barzani's Foreign

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Relations Official Safin Dizayi as saying, "Official meetings started between Turkey and the Kurdish Administration in northern Iraq." Dizayi mentioned Murat Ozcelik's meeting with the officials in Dohuk and said that "Ozcelik wanted me to attend the meeting between the Kurdish Administration and the governor of Dohuk."

TV News:
CNN Turk

Domestic News

- Four suspects, including two children, have been taken into custody on Sunday in connection with an attack against Cumhuriyet daily. A 13-year old assailant was captured after he threw a Molotov cocktail at the newspaper's office in Istanbul on Saturday.

- The Kuwaiti Emir Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jabir al-Sabah will meet Prime Minister Erdogan in Ankara on Monday.

- Parliament's commission for human rights has initiated an investigation into reports that a 15-year old youth was beaten by three police officers in front of cameras in Hakkari, Yuksekova.

International News

- Radical Shiite leader Moqtada al-Sadr has ordered his followers to stop attacks on security forces in Baghdad and Basra.

- Hillary Clinton has rejected calls by the supporters of Barack Obama to quit the race.

- Nine nations that joined the EU in 2004 have dropped passport controls for Schengen citizen air passengers.

WILSON